“In Search of Better Lawns”

High quality lawns are a priority for many Gulf Coast residents. Anyone who establishes and maintains a lawn however, will occasionally encounter some disease, insect or other disorder that needs attention. In most cases a correct diagnosis and treatment of the problem is available, but sometimes not.

There are currently two major lawn concerns that are being addressed by studies being done in Santa Rosa County. A recently recognized disease known as centipedegrass decline in that grass and take-all root rot in St. Augustine is causing serious problems in many home lawns. In both grasses, this disorder is found in association with the fungus, *Gaeumannomyces graminis* var. *graminis*, and to this point it has not responded well to control by currently used fungicides or other practices.

Just last week three local lawns were located that tested positive for this fungus. They also exhibited the typical dead patches and unthrifty growth associated with the disease. These lawns have received replicated treatments using fungicides and other practices that show some promise. Hopefully, by the end of the growing season we might have some information that will be helpful.

This kind of work is only possible through the cooperation of many people. Dr. Bryan Unruh and staff at the West Florida Research and Education center are providing expertise, equipment and labor. Rex Lawson, an Escambia County Master Gardener, has assisted by researching documents and will help with data collection.

Another interesting lawn study is underway along the coast. We will try to determine how much, if any, fertilizer is leaching or washing into surface water following lawn fertilization. Two typical waterfront lawns have been selected and plots have been installed.

This research is being made possible by a grant from one of our new Master Gardeners. The Dennis Snyder (class of 2,000) family has provided funds that will enable us to purchase supplies and have the necessary tests conducted.

Buck Thackery (Master Gardener class of 1999) will head up the project which will involve much work installing the plots and collecting data and Dr. Laurie Trenholm, Extension Turfgrass Specialist with the University of Florida,

designed the experiment. We are applying different fertilizers at different rates and will actually measure how much the turfgrass is using and how much is being lost to leaching and runoff.

Once this research has been completed and the data analyzed, we hope to find out, under “real world conditions,” if lawn fertilization is contributing to water pollution. There are several questions needing some answers. Among them: Is excess fertilizer from lawns leaching into the ground water or washing into surface water? If so, how much? How much effect does the use of a slow release product versus a quick release fertilizer have? Is there an ideal rate that supplies the needed minerals, yet does not contaminate water?

Though much of our work is reactive - responding to specific questions from the public, these are examples of two proactive projects that Extension is presently involved with. Such work helps to maintain some balance in our programs, helps to obtain useful information for the public and its nice to get out and do some hands-on work.